
SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter 2008-2009

It was a sensational season on **Ben Nevis**. One of the most glittering prizes in Scottish climbing fell to Andy Turner and Tony Stone in early March, when they made the first winter ascent of *Sassenach*. This provocatively named climb was first climbed by Joe Brown and Don Whillans in April 1954. It was the first route to breach the impressive front face of Carn Dearg Buttress, which bristles with overlaps and hanging grooves. *Sassenach* takes the prominent chimney in the steep central section, and is defended at its base by a severely overhanging corner. Brown and Whillans aided through this and then continued up the chimneys and grooves above. The route was graded Very Severe (the highest grade at the time) and was climbed free 15 years later by Steve Wilson at E3 6a, although the chimneys themselves are thought to be worth E1 5b in their own right.

A winter ascent of this great line had been considered for nearly 30 years and Al Rouse talked about it in the early 1980s. The route is rarely in condition, so ever the innovator, Rouse had a plan to divert a stream at the top of the cliff so it ran down the line and would ice up the following winter. Rouse never did attempt the route, but during the cold snowy winters of the 1980s the lower section did indeed ice up. Snow melt from the ledge above formed an icefall that led past the aid section, but the upper chimneys remained typically bare and nobody took up the challenge.

The explosion of mixed climbing standards over the last few years has transformed *Sassenach* from an unlikely ice climb to a demanding technical mixed challenge. Carn Dearg Buttress is not often in mixed condition, but it does hold hoar frost and powder snow most winters. Turner attempted the line with Steve Ashworth in February 2008, and succeeded in climbing the lower part of the route through the aid section using two rest points, but the pair ran out of steam and abseiled off. They left a few pieces of gear in place in the overhanging corner that they were unable to retrieve because the route was too steep.

Early in March 2009, Turner returned with Tony Stone to attempt *Sassenach* once again. The pair were full of confidence having made the third winter ascent of *Centurion* (VIII,8) with Iain Small three days before in a very swift eight hours. More importantly Carn Dearg Buttress was white with powder snow. 'This is a route that needs specific conditions,' Turner explained on his blog. 'The whole of the Ben can be plastered white after a storm but that part of Carn Dearg always stays black. What it needs is the 'Perfect Storm' – north-west gale force winds and loads of snow.'

Stone led the first pitch and soon Turner was facing the crux. 'When Don Whillans first led this pitch he used several pieces of aid,' Turner contin-



191. Iain Small on the first winter ascent of *Castro* (VII,8), Sgurr an Fhidhleir, 8 February 2009. (*Simon Richardson*)

ued. 'There are no useful footholds anywhere. On the left wall everything slopes the wrong way. Clipping the frozen Friend and Bulldog I placed the previous winter, it never crossed my mind that the Friend wouldn't hold a fall. Trying to remember any useful holds was useless, as ice had changed the whole appearance of the pitch. At one point my feet ripped and I was left hanging with my feet dangling in space. I've never understood the use of 'power screaming' but I found myself screaming my lungs out just to force myself on. Several sketchy balancy moves later saw me standing relieved at the base of the chimney.'

Stone immediately went to work on the next pitch. 'He set off slowly, getting higher and higher, and further and further into the mountain. The

chimney was drawing him in. At one point he had to take his helmet off just to turn his head to see where he was going. I think a good old gritstone apprenticeship was the order of the day. Eventually the thrutching ended and a belay was found.' The rest of the chimney passed relatively uneventfully and the pair finished up some beautiful icy grooves. They reached the summit of the buttress, just as darkness fell, with the historic first winter ascent of *Sassenach* (IX,9) in the bag.

Other highlights on Ben Nevis included first winter ascents of *Heidbanger* (VIII,8 – Rich Cross and Andy Benson), *Metamorphosis* (VIII,9 – Iain Small and Gareth Hughes), *Devastation* (VII,8 – Ian Parnell and Andy Benson), *The Brass Monkey* (VII,8 – Pete Davies and Tim Marsh) and *The Minge* (VII,8 – Pete MacPherson and Mark 'Ed' Edwards). In contrast, Iain Small and Simon Richardson bucked the trend of climbing summer routes with *The Cone Collectors* (VIII,8), a winter-only line on the North Wall of Carn Dearg. In a similar vein, across in the Mamores, Dave MacLeod and Malcolm Kent added the fierce sounding *Yo Bro* (VIII,9) on the granite crag on Mullach nan Coirean.

A series of cold snaps in the early and middle part of the winter brought the North-West into good condition. One of the highlights was the first winter ascent of the very technical *Hung, Drawn and Quartered* (VIII,8) on **Sgurr nan Gillean** on Skye by Martin Moran and Nick Dixon. Graded E4 in summer and overhanging for much of its height, this is said to be the most difficult summer gully climb on the island. Back on the mainland, Ian Small and Simon Richardson made the first winter ascent of *Castro* (VII,8), the prominent line of weakness on the 300m-high Magic Bow wall on **Sgurr an Fhìdhleir**, and nearby on the West Face of **Quinag**, Andy Nisbet, John Lyall and Mark 'Ed' Edwards made the first ascent of the spectacular overhanging chimney of *Assynt of Man* (VI,6).

Beinn Eighe was another scene of intense activity and the Fuselage Wall area saw a number of new additions including *Spitfire* (VII,8 – Viv Scott and Steve Ashworth), *Mosquito* (V,7 – Andy Nisbet, John Lyall and Jonathan Preston), *War Games* (VI,7 – Nisbet and Lyall), *Grand Slam* (V,7 – Nisbet, Lyall and Pete MacPherson) and *Ace* (VI,7 – Malcolm Bass and Simon Yearsley). On West Central Wall, the showpiece crag on the mountain, Guy Robertson and Tony Stone pulled off a notable coup with the first winter ascent of *Chop Suey* (VIII,8). This summer E1, which was described as 'dangerously loose' by the first ascentionists, resulted in a superb winter route.

The big event on Beinn Eighe was the first ascent of *Bruised Violet* (VIII,9), to the right of Chop Suey, by Ian Parnell and Andy Turner. After a couple of failures and a nasty avalanche incident earlier in the season, Parnell was in a determined mood when he returned in early March. His first attempt to climb the initial overhang on the second pitch was thwarted when the ice clipper krab on his harness became wedged into a crack. Higher up he went the wrong way, down-climbed, and then had his arms lock up due to cramp and dropped a tool. The pair eventually finished the five-pitch



192. Iain Small on the first ascent of *The Cone Collectors* (VIII,8), Ben Nevis, 14 December 2008. (*Simon Richardson*)

route in darkness. For Parnell, a new route on West Central Wall was the realisation of a long held dream, and he explained afterwards that the route ‘doesn’t really follow the slabbier summer lines of the two E2s here, but searches out steeper ground with deeper better hooking cracks... The hardest thing on this wall is finding the line and convincing yourself that the route will go through such hostile looking territory.’

Without doubt the most significant ascent in the Northern Highlands however, and one of the most important Scottish winter routes for several

years, was the first ascent of *The God Delusion* (IX,9) on the Giant's Wall on **Beinn Bhan** in the Northern Highlands. This 200m-high vertical cliff in Coire nan Fhamhair between Gully of the Gods and Great Overhanging Gully has an aura of impregnability that is truly jaw-dropping. The sandstone face is close to vertical, bristles with overhangs and has no continuous lines of weakness. Its defining gullies are sought after winter prizes in their own right, and when Martin Moran and Paul Tattersall climbed the line of *The Godfather* (VIII,8) up the left side of the wall in 2002 it was seen as a significant step forward in North-West climbing. *The Godfather* finishes up a vertical corner, the only significant feature on the upper wall, so when news of a new route to its right appeared on the Internet, it created real excitement.

The God Delusion (IX,9) was the work of Pete Benson and Guy Robertson, one of the most successful Scottish winter partnerships of recent years. They are no strangers to the cliff and made a spirited second ascent attempt on *The Godfather* with Es Tresidder a couple of seasons ago. Unfortunately Benson took a fall within a few metres of easy ground at the top of the route and broke his ankle. The ensuing retreat down seven pitches of vertical to overhanging terrain in the dark, followed by a long walk out was a sobering experience, but both Benson and Robertson were struck by the possibility of adding another line to the wall.

They first attempted *The God Delusion* in December, but Robertson took a big fall when he pulled off a TV-sized block on the sixth pitch. They returned a few days later, climbed the first two pitches in the dark and by early afternoon they had reached pitch 6. It was very steep and there was no obvious way to go. 'You look up and all you see are roofs,' Robertson recounted. 'But incredibly each roof was fringed by a turf moustache! I tried to probe a way through the steepest section to the left, but on the second try I looked across and saw a more promising line. For about 15 metres the climbing was pretty futuristic, but when manteling onto an undercut ledge I realised that I was absolutely spent. I said to Pete that I'd lost it and just let go. One of my tools pulled, but the second tool stayed in and I was left hanging from my spring leash. Fortunately I was able to prusik back up the leash and continue the pitch.'

December days are short, and they completed the last couple of pitches in the dark to emerge on the summit plateau under a brilliant starlit sky. The pair thought the crux pitch was technical 9, but every other pitch was 7 or 8 making it the most difficult winter climb yet achieved in the Northern Highlands. But it was not just the sustained difficulty of the route that caught everyone's imagination, but the style the route was climbed. 'If you stick to traditional ethics,' Robertson explained, 'there's no avoiding the total commitment required to climb hard mixed routes in Scotland, especially new ones. No summer knowledge, no pre-inspection, no fixed gear. Just rock up and go for it, bottom to top. That's the gauntlet; anything else is heresy.'